Contact Zones: Multispecies Scholarship Through 'Imperial Eyes'

i. Introduction

Pratt's (2008[1992]) influential 'contact zone' depicts a 'social space where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths' (7). Developed as a postcolonial tool of critique, Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone' challenged common depictions of imperial frontiers in genres of travel writing from the mid 18th century onwards by attending to the complex processes of meaning-making that occurred as a result of 'the spatial and temporary copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures' (x). By foregrounding accounts of syncretism, communicative improvisation, and co-constitution, Pratt emphasised how colonizers and colonized were mutually constituted through relational events and thus contested uni-directional accounts of power (Stoler, 2006). In privileging the voices of those subordinated by the colonial mission, Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* offered a challenge to the 'monopoly on interpretation and knowledge' that imperial enterprises had claimed. As an intervention, Pratt not only challenged the erasure of the 'other' but raised important questions about translation, decipherability, and the dangers of misunderstanding.

In a context where the dichotomies of western thought and colonial power continue to shape the political and ethical constitution of animals (Collard and Dempsey 2013, 2692; see also Anderson, 2000; Rose, 2011; Todd, 2016; Wolfe, 2003), I suggest that the critical framing of the contact zone has significant value for multispecies work concerned with human-non-human interaction and the violences of asymmetrical relations. Indeed, the concept has already been popularized by Haraway (2008), who was drawn to Pratt's concept precisely because it foregrounded interactive and improvisational elements of contact. For Haraway, 'co-constitutive companion species and coevolution are the rule, not the exception' and thus most of the 'transformative things in life happen in contact zones', for they 'change the subject – all the subjects – in surprising ways' (219).

As Haraway's interpretation of the contact zone has circulated, the traces of Pratt's postcolonial critique have not always remained. Its general use, however, chimes with a concern for understanding the entanglements of multiple 'living selves'; the blurring of

species lines; and the production of mutual ecologies and alliances as a way of shaking up established ways of addressing questions of relatedness and power (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010). In demonstrating the value of the 'contact zone' as a critical tool of analysis and staying with the wider postcolonial critique of *Imperial Eyes*, the paper contributes to animal geographies scholarship that has sought to 'rework prominent concepts' that have largely focused on the human (Lorimer et al. 2017: 2), whilst remaining attentive to the social differences that can too often be 'squeezed out' (Probyn, 2016:12; Todd, 2016). In section II, I begin by overviewing how Pratt's critical vocabulary has been deployed within geography and other cognate disciplines. In doing so, I draw out what holds this work together but also note how the concept is variously lifted out of its original context so as to attend more broadly to the spaces where difference is thrown together. Whilst this demonstrates the flexibility of the concept and the broad interpretation of social space that it allows, section II argues that more can be gained from staying with the critical framing of *Imperial Eyes* – its postcolonial analysis, emphasis on highly uneven structures of power, and its concern with questions of decipherability and representation. If the contact zone is to be used to consider relations of domination or *'their aftermaths'* (Pratt 2008:7 my emphasis), then staying with such a critical framing necessitates a careful consideration of the (dis)continuities of 'imperial formations' (Stoler, 2016).

Section III then turns to 'encounter' as a concept that is, by Pratt's definition, intimately linked to the contact zone. 'Encounter' is already used extensively within multispecies work but in offering a conceptual interrogation of encounter I demonstrate how it functions as a very specific *'genre of contact'* (Wilson, 2017; 2019). In focusing on encounters with embodied difference, I demonstrate how they become important to understanding historical formations of difference, whilst at the same time being central to narratives of difference that concern the immanent potential to become otherwise (Deleuze, 2014). In noting the increased use of encounter as a site through which to think through questions of ethics, radical alterity, and potential, Section III questions to what extent the idea of 'encounter' differs from the 'contact zone' as a tool of analysis.

In response to the above questions, Sections IV and V develop a critical evaluation of the BBC's *Blue Planet II*. Using the concept of the contact zone and discourse analysis, these sections examine the documentary's dominant ideas, "frontiers of difference", and

the means through which alternative geographies are both foreclosed and enabled (Dittmer, 2010). In so doing, I suggest that the concept of the contact zone shifts attention away from the encounter between viewer and screen (which has been central to understanding the productions of the charismatic figure in forms of environmentalism (Lorimer, 2015)), to focus on the documentary's site of production: the ocean. Described as the 'final frontier on earth', the ocean is where different forms of knowledge, technology, people, and non-human life grapple with each other in conditions that are shaped by shifting forms of power. In moving between oceanic contact zones and David Attenborough's narrative, I raise fundamental questions about knowledge, representation, and monopolies on interpretation. The paper finishes by considering the forms of 'humannness' (Wynter, 2015) that are deployed in Blue Planet II and the tension that exists between a desire for decipherability and the need to hold onto the 'indecipherable' elements of human-animal encounter. I conclude with the challenges that remain for questions of representation in multispecies scholarship.

ii. A Return to Imperial Eyes

One of the central drivers for Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* was an interest in the voices and perspectives that remained absent from the archives. As she noted, 'the more I studied the huge corpus of travel literature written by Europeans over two hundred and fifty years, the more aware I became of the participants whose voices I wasn't hearing' (5). Pratt refers to a gap: an absence in the archive that called for another story. What of the views of those who were subordinated, or on the receiving end of intervention? Whilst the contact zones of the frontiers of European expansion were sites of co-constitution, grappling, and co-presence, the archives told a decidedly one-sided account that (re)produced the 'monopoly on knowledge and interpretation that the imperial enterprise sought' (7).

Imperial Eyes is full of instances where documents pertaining to alternative experiences of colonial encounter and rule were lost or went unnoticed. This includes a critique of colonialism that was sent to the Spanish King, Philip III, in 1615. Written in Quechua, Aymara, and Spanish, by Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala (a descendent of Inca nobility), this trilingual text detailed the abusive colonial treatment of The Andeans in the Spanish

Colonies, and offered a description of the history and lifeways of the pre-colonial Andean peoples; a detailed report denouncing the exploitative and cruel behaviour of the Spanish; and recommendations for reforms to improve colonial governance (Coronel-Molina, 2009). Having disappeared 'under unknown circumstances' (xiv) it remained in obscurity until 1908 when it was found in a library in Copenhagen (ibid). Following the development of a means to produce facsimile copies and transcriptions, a partial translation has since revealed alternative depictions of cultural (ex)change. As Pratt agues, lack of understanding is one of the perils of the contact zone, but one that is both exacerbated and sustained by asymmetrical relations of power, the disappearance of alternative perspectives, and the challenges of decipherability and/or translation.

To date, and in keeping with her concern for challenging depictions of imperial frontiers, Pratt's 'contact zone' has been used widely across the social sciences as a way of attending to 'culture-making' in the context of unequal relations and as a means of destabilizing or troubling normative understandings of division, distinction, or practices of bordering (see for example Askins and Pain, 2011; Faier, 2009; Hesse, 2001; Probyn, 2005; Sundberg, 2006; Wilson, 2016; Wise, 2009). For example, scholars explicitly seeking to destabilize *representations* that too readily exaggerate frontier narratives have used the contact zone as a means of description. In a challenge to representations of the US-Mexico border in American films, dell'Agnese (2005) frames it as a site shaped by the privileged position of whiteness but also cultural syncretism (217). In highlighting its regional geographies, hybrid forms, multiple identities, and in-between states, she describes the border as a contact zone so as to trouble depictions of it as a stark, political divide characterized by oppositional logics. In a very different context, Morrissey (2005) uses the contact zone to describe the 'amalgamation' of Gaelic and Anglo worlds in late medieval Ireland so as to underline the prevalence of social and cultural contact in a context where a 'frontier' lens has exaggerated division and overlooked interconnection. In undermining the logics of opposition, these two examples complicate unequal structures, rather than deny them.

In a concern for contexts where previously separated people have now been brought together, ethnographies of various 'contact zones' consider the intimate forms and sites that remake culture and identity across unequal relations of power. Faier (2009), for instance, focuses on the interactions between rural Japanese residents and Filipina

migrants, whilst Yeoh and Willis (2005) examine the multitude of contact zones that have been created by the coming together of British and Singaporean elites in China. Both studies are shaped by colonial pasts and post-colonial presents and use the contact zone as both a metaphor and reference to geographical space, allowing them to interrogate how 'frontiers of difference' are negotiated through interactions that continuously remake them and create communicative improvisations (see also Wise, 2009). The use of the contact zone for understanding the social and cultural complexities of interactions is also evident in work focused on organized settings where people are purposefully brought together as a means of working through various differences (Askins and Pain, 2011; Christiansen et al. 2017; Mayblin et al. 2016; Wilson, 2017). These examples document instances where diverse groups have to work out a way of communicating across difference through the use of material objects and the identification of commonalities.

Some of the above examples are more explicit in centering questions of power than others, whilst some are far more concerned with the thrown-togetherness of people, and others place greater emphasis on attending to forms of communicative improvisation, or challenging border narratives. All, however, deal with colonial or imperial forms. As Stoler (2016) notes, it is in making connections between violating histories and contemporary conditions that questions about how we name, identify, and recognize the presence of unequal relations become important. Given that the contact zone has been used to make sense of a variety of different contexts or social spaces that are shaped by asymmetrical power relations *'or their aftermaths'* (Pratt, 2002), it is important to remain attentive to the fictitious stability that concepts too readily achieve (Stoler, 2016). For instance, following Stoler, a concern with imperial formations might require us to challenge the idea that we can readily identify 'imperialism'; that we defy the assumption that we have easy access to 'what it entails, how it manifests and on whom it most impinges' (2016:10).

Taking the above concerns forward Section III reflects more fully on the idea of 'encounter' and its relationship to the contact zone as an entry point for thinking about *multispecies* contact zones. A concern with the dangers of one-sided accounts in the context of unequal relations is one that has been central to multispecies work, which has raised challenging questions about voice, interpretation, and decipherability (Kirksey and

Helmreich, 2010, Hodgetts and Lorimer, 2015), whilst recognizing that multispecies encounters are always recounted and refracted through human lenses that are themselves partial and situated (Wilson, 2019; Hovorka, 2016; Probyn, 2016). Though Pratt's 'contact zone' has largely been used to consider human framings of the social, it was developed as a critical, postcolonial tool to interrogate travel writing that concerned far more than the human and was often accused of writing the human out (Wulf, 2015). Travel writing during the age of empire was littered with descriptions of fauna and flora, narratives of fraught animal encounter, illustrations of weird and rich plant life, and a fascination with insects, fungi, and other lively beings, which were pivotal to the construction of geographical imaginations, the systemization of nature, and the emergence of colonial regimes of difference (Delbourgo, 2017; Smith, 2015).

iii. Frontiers, species, and encounter

By Pratt's definition, encounters are central to the contact zone, which she describes as the space of 'imperial encounters' (1992:8). Yet whilst *Imperial Eyes* details the conceptual merits of 'contact' (as borrowed from linguistics where 'contact language' referred to 'an improvised language that develops amongst speakers of different tongues'), less is said about the use of encounter. If we trace the etymology of encounter we see a form of meeting that arises from the Latin incontrāre, meaning against, contrary, or opposed to (OED, 2017). The primary definition of an encounter is a face-to-face meeting between adversaries or opposing forces, thus making it a meeting 'in conflict; hence a battle, a skirmish or duel' (OED, 2017). This combative legacy can be seen in India, where to 'die in an encounter' is a euphemism for being killed during a battle with the police or military (Duschinski, 2010). More broadly, however, encounter has often been used as a means of depicting the dramatic coming together of different geographical imaginations, such that 'the 'colonial encounter' frequently refers to a *period* of colonial exploration, exploitation, boundary-making, cultural imperialism, and cross-cultural formations (Ahmed, 2000; Carter, 2013; Greene, 2002; Kim, 2015; Leshem and Pinkerton, 2018; Smith, 2015). That encounters are used to describe interaction in the contact zone is thus unsurprising.

These legacies of conflict and opposition can be seen in the spatial concepts that are regularly used in descriptions of encounter, which include 'frontier', 'borderland', and

'boundary' (see for example Power, 2009; Wolch and Emel, 1998; Yeo and Neo, 2010), all of which achieve much of their 'explanatory power' from 'the strong link between colonialism and geography' (Leavelle 2004:915). These 'border imaginaries' are further perpetuated by the Manichean grammars of difference that encounters are frequently read through, which mobilise dualisms that assume a lack of commonality, absolute opposition and, as such, crystalise symbolic logics of 'us versus them' (Rovisco, 2010:1015).

In tracing the use of encounter across the social sciences, it is noticeable that it is most commonly used in work that features non-human animals (Wilson, 2017; 2018). In some instances, 'encounter' is simply used as a means to describe the coming together of human and non-human animals in different contexts, but in others, it appears as a site of analytical interest (Tsing, 2016). For instance, a number of writers have demonstrated the value of 'thinking with encounters' for transforming how we relate to 'that which is beyond the human', particularly in relation to questions of ethics (Johnson, 2015:297; see also McKiernan and Instone, 2016; Todd and Hynes, 2017); Deleuzian concerns with 'becoming animal' (Bear and Eden, 2011); and how people negotiate creatures that are considered 'radically different from anthropocentric norms' in empirical terms (Lorimer, 2007:920; Keul, 2013). In a different set of debates, Barua (2016:3) develops Haraway's concept of 'encounter value' as a way of approaching 'value, labour and production in less humanist terms'. By focusing on the mobilization of non-human animals in ecotourism he explores how encounters – and their experiential qualities – are commodified, which feeds into a wider set of concerns for the often-violent implications of rendering non-human life 'encounterable' through a variety of means (Collard, 2014).

Whether encounter appears as a site of analytical interest, a description of contact, or both, it is worth asking why it appears so frequently in animal geographies and multispecies scholarship (Böhm and Ullrich, 2019). Given that encounters are often framed by oppositional logics, their prevalence might be taken as evidence of the continued leagacy of Cartesian dualisms within Western thought and the tendency to cast the animal as the 'absolute other' (Anderson, 2000). Such otherness can be seen in work concerned with dimensions of human-animal *conflict* is full of depictions of strange, disturbing, fraught, chance, and violent encounters. Whether the challenges of coexisting with coyotes or cougars in North America (Collard, 2012); the growing presence of

Macaques in the borderlands of Singapore (Yeo and Neo, 2010); shark catch and kill policies in Australia (Gibbs and Warren, 2014); or the verminisation of rats in urban areas (Holmberg, 2016); notions of encounter are central to accounts where non-human animals are somehow rendered out of place or too close for comfort. Whilst each of these examples of human-animal conflict must be placed in their specific cultural, political, and ecological contexts, they each tell us something about conceptual and/or physical borders and boundaries. Many examples of human-animal encounters are about the breach of spatial and regulatory boundaries – home spaces, urban borderlands, safe swim zones and so on –, but the distinctions of human/animal, society/nature, urban/rural, domestic/wild that are central to these renderings are a reminder of the colonial knowledge-practices that continue to define humanity on the basis of the separation between humans and animals (Haraway, 1989; Hovorka, 2017; Rose, 2011)

An attention to the use of encounter as a vocabulary of and for difference becomes a way of noticing borders that are not always explicitly drawn but are nevertheless called into being. I share Tsing's (2015:29) argument that a commitment to noticing how categories emerge through encounter should coincide with a commitment to tracing the formations that give these categories a 'momentary hold' (see also Sundberg, 2006). However, whilst encounters can highlight distinctions, and thus forms of separation or psychological and cultural distance, it is important to emphasise that they are also events of *relation*. The experiences of shock, surprise, and rupture, that so often accompany accounts of human-animal encounters are evidence of a moment in which something is destabilised or unexpectedly broken open; a moment in which borders are shifted, exposed, crossed, made, unmade, and undermined (Wilson, 2017). As Power (2009) demonstrates, encounters between humans and animals can not only 'rupture' the physical borders that materially distinguish home spaces from the outside, but also challenge and sometimes undermine conceptual and symbolic borders so as to fundamentally shake up taken-for-granted human/nature distinctions (Bull, 2011; Castree, 2013). Encounters, then, do not simply take place at the border, and are not simply about existing borders, but are rather central to their making and unmaking (Ahmed, 2000; Sundberg, 2011). In a description that captures both the drawing together of the happening, and the oppositional logics that simultaneously frame it (Sundberg, 2006), Probyn (2016:50) describes the act of encountering as 'the push and pull of intimacy and distance'. This simultaneous 'push and pull' is what leads Ahmed (2000) to

challenge any linear narrative of the contact zone that might present it as a space where things previously distant are now made proximate. As Ahmed argues, distance is often produced at the point of contact (p.12).

How moments of rupture, unmaking, and categorical confusion are experienced is important (Bennett, 2001). As Kim argues, the rupturing or failure of boundaries is often attended by 'indeterminacy, contestation, and anxiety' (2009: 31; see also Fredriksen, 2016). Take, for example, Carter and Palmer's (2017) account of the 'morally loaded' term of transgression in the context of human-dingo encounters in Australia (where dingoes variously appear as a 'problem' in public policy). As they argue, read as a breach or violation, human-dingo encounters that are *experienced* as a form of transgression reveal 'principles of human exceptionalism' and asymmetries of power. The threat of transgression is thus a threat to a topology that privileges a particular understanding of 'the human' (Carter and Palmer, 2017:216), which, as Todd and Hynes (2017:7) suggest, might lead to the avoidance or refusal of encounter in order to preserve categorical stability (Todd and Hynes, 2017:7). Crucially, such an experience of transgression is founded on the distinctions between humans and nature that emerged through colonial reasoning and is not an experience that is necessarily evident in other ways of knowing and relating (c.f. Rose (2011) on the tendency to erase indigenous knowledge and standpoints).

Clearly, whilst moments of encounter are sometimes read as instances of failed mastery or trauma that ignite the need to reinstate control of the boundary and the power of privilege (Kim, 2009), the rupturing of borders that is inherent to encounter also opens up a site of ethical, pedagogical, and political potential (Wilson, 2017). For Tsing (2015), 'we are contaminated by encounters' (p.27), they always take us somewhere new. In being in an encounter with another 'we are not quite ourselves any more (46)'. Tsing works with the idea of encounter as a way of attending to interspecies relations that emerge in what she describes as the 'seams of imperial space' (2012:141). Like Haraway (2008) and Rose (2011), Tsing's interest in encounter stems from a concern for understanding how lives are constituted *in relation* – lichen, fungi, oaks, orchids, rocks, farmers, pickers, are all part of a multispecies flourishing.

It is clear that the concept of encounter has considerable traction in animal studies and more-than-human geographies. As a concept, it is inherently valuable because it can draw attention to geohistorical formations of embodied difference and the contingent *emergence* of difference at the same time (Wilson, 2017). But, if the contact zone is the space of encounter, it is important to ask what the contact zone offers that the concept of encounter doesn't beyond insisting on a spatial reading. Work on encounter already attends to the spatialities of contact, to the ways in which encounters make space but also fold in multiple elsewheres (Ahmed, 2002; Darling and Wilson, 2016). Yet there is, I suggest, a difference between spaces of encounter and the contact zone, the most obvious being that the contact zone does not privilege the encounter, but rather concerns multiple forms of relation, communicative practice, and contact, and explicitly focuses on spaces that are shaped by significant asymmetry.

An encounter is an event of relation – it is about two beings or things that are momentarily held together. Encounters make (a) difference and are often experienced as something that disrupts, unsettles, or surprises in ways that can be as affirmative as they can be violent. But whilst an encounter is a relational event and thus necessarily involves more than one being or thing, it is not necessarily the case that all involved in an encounter will experience it *as an encounter*; not all encounters are *two-way*. The experience of transgression that is described by Carter and Palmer (2017) as arising from the chance happening across a dingo out of place, is not reliant on the dingo's awareness of the other's presence. This is important because, by contrast, Pratt's use of the contact zone is concerned with meaning-making *on both sides*. It is a zone of multiple encounters *and* other forms of relation, where multiple beings grapple with each other through *ongoing* interaction. In the contact zone, we might see the first surprise of encounter give way to something else.

Having outlined how ideas of encounter offer a distinct way into questions of non-human difference and the contingent (de)formation of categories, I want to turn to the example of *Blue Planet II* as a way of examining how ideas of encounter and the contact zone might be put to use as a tool of analysis in multispecies scholarship.

Iv. Blue Planet II: into the 'Deep'

The oceans, seemingly limitless, invoke in us a sense of awe and wonder and also, sometimes, fear. They cover 70% of the surface of our planet and yet they are still the least explored. Hidden beneath the waves, right beneath my feet there are creatures beyond our imagination. With revolutionary technology we can enter new worlds and shine a light on behaviours in ways that were impossible just a generation ago. We've also recognised an uncomfortable fact – the health of our oceans is under threat, they are changing faster than ever before in human history […] Never has there been a more crucial time to reveal what is going on under the surface of the seas […] In this first episode we will journey across the globe, from the warm waters of the tropics to the coldest around the poles to bring us a new understanding of life beneath the waves. This is Blue Planet II. (1, 00:29).

Aired in 2017, Blue Planet II is a documentary series produced by the BBC Natural History Unit. Narrated by Sir David Attenborough and filmed 'off every continent', this 7-part series on the world's oceans was four years in the making and aired 16 years after its predecessor 'The Blue Planet'. Having been mentioned in countless environmental campaigns across the world (Crisp, 2018; Greenpeace, 2017), credited with shaping the development of environmental policy (Rawlinson, 2018), and cited for its impact on consumer behavior (particularly in relation to single-use plastics, cf. John Lewis (2018)), it is considered one of the most influential series of its kind.

In the opening account, 'extraordinary nature' comes into view: a nature that has so far defied human understanding. In this respect Blue Planet II takes us to the edge. But if the creatures of the ocean have so far remained 'beyond our imagination', they are also presented as ripe for discovery through new state of the art technology and a planetary journey that promises to bring 'us' new knowledge. The promise to enter into "new worlds" – and "shine a light" – is a familiar imperial trope that describes the incorporation of marginal spaces into a realm of authority (Messeri, 2016; Pratt, 1992). Blue Planet II describes the ocean as "the final frontier on Earth" (1, 49:26); as being full of potential, and, at various points, a "vast, empty blue" (4, 14:52). Indeed, for all of the emphasis on shared worlds and on exposing the deadly consequences of environmental destruction, capitalist waste, and human intervention (which implicates both narrator and audience), there is still a display of mastery – an enterprise of claims-making, assertions to a monopoly on knowledge, and a desire to give order. Blue Planet II therefore displays some of the hallmarks of what Pratt (1992:9) describes as a form of 'anti-conquest': gestures of innocence that distract from simultaneous assertions of hegemony.

'Encounter value' (Haraway, 2008) is central to Blue Planet II's success. In its endeavor to offer close encounters with the 'unimaginable', Blue Planet II is another example of how wildlife documentaries have responded to the desire for affective and haptic encounters with 'alterity' in highly mediated ways (Lorimer, 2015). It not only takes us into the watery worlds of lives that are 'rarely encountered' and have remained on the margins as 'awkward creatures' (cf. Ginn et al. 2014; Bear, 2011; Bear and Eden, 2011; Gibbs and Warren 2014), but grapples with the 'watery environment itself' (Alaimo 2013: 234;). As Rutherford (2011) suggests, the staging of intimacy between human and non-human animals is not only a way of encouraging people to care for wild animals and nature but also a way of disciplining them. Viewers are brought into "close encounter" with all manner of "magical", "deadly", "enchanting" and "alien", creatures that variously lurk, glide and shimmer across the screen. Close-ups of tendrils, claws, suckers, and fins are interwoven with stories of environmental disaster, impending loss, and spectacular beauty, as the series navigates swells, whirlpools, currents, and storms, the darkness of the abyssal zones, and the 'boiling seas' (4, 49:23).

The heavy emphasis on 'non-human charisma' (Lorimer, 2007), from the awe-inspiring to the fear-inducing, is supported by a 'tidal orchestra' and the work of acclaimed composer Hans Zimmer, who was tasked with creating the 'feel' of the ocean and the personality of its diverse life forms. Whether the discordant and sinister violins that accompany the sharks and the poisonous tendrils of a Portuguese man o' war, the plucky and jaunty 'Baby Turtle' score, or the alien sounds of the cuttlefish, the Blue Planet II soundtrack instructs emotional response and creates sensational viewing. The documentary enables 'close encounters' in high definition (1, 49:00), which disappear its production and systems of power, whilst creating the illusion of intimacy with an untouched nature in a manner that mixes environmentalism, science, and aesthetics (see also Alaimo, 2013). Whilst highly stylized, it is important to ask whether such close encounters provoke recognition of other ways of being – 'aquatic modes of being, communicating, and knowing' – in a way that might befit what Alaimo (2013) calls 'a violet-black ecology'. Such an ecology, she argues, would entice us 'to descend, rather than transcend, to unmoor ourselves from terrestrial and humanist presumptions, as sunlight, air, and horizons disappear' (235).

Whilst the aestheticized images of Blue Planet II might mask their production, a ten-minute segment at the end of each one-hour episode – '*Into the Blue'* – offers brief glimpses of the contact zone as it recounts how the footage was achieved. In this ten-minute segment, we see contact zones where wildlife photographers, producers, technical crew, surfers, different communities, and researchers, grapple with water, wind, rocks, and ice, plankton, plants and all other manner of life across uneven and always shifting relations of power and knowledge-practices. But encounters are just one element of the contact zone. In these segments, descriptions of technological advances and achievements are accompanied with stories of struggle and hardship, long waits, endurance, thwarted efforts and repeated failures as the Blue Planet II teams scramble for the perfect shot, but frequently miss. Perhaps predictably, each story of missed opportunity and disappointment is followed by the euphoria of contact – life-changing experiences that are recalled and recounted for the viewers at home in a manner akin to the triumphant narratives of exploration from Europe's early frontiers. In an online account, one of the producers depicts the work that went into filming what she described as one of 'the most infamous creatures of the abyss' – the Humboldt squid (Doherty, 2017). Named after the current in which they gather off the coast of Chile, and a fitting reminder of the enduring legacy of von Humboldt's South American expeditions (Wulf, 2015), the Humboldt squid required a journey to the 'gloom of the Twilight Zone'. As Doherty (original emphasis) recounts, the desire to spend time with these animals in 'THEIR world', meant working in tough conditions – ripping currents and rough seas in the 'vast open ocean'. We read of submersibles capable of reaching significant depths, 'ingenious inventions' that mimic the 'bioluminescent distress signals of deep-sea jellyfish' (ibid), state of the art cameras, and LED lights. It is also a tale of 'luck' that is shot through with days of frustration and waiting but one that finishes with the capture of 'behaviours never seen, let alone filmed before' (ibid). As Doherty put it; 'in an extraordinary collaboration with scientists and field researchers spanning two years, we captured these exquisite animals in *their* world, unearthing another secret of the deep ocean' (ibid).

To unearth is to expose: to bring to the surface what is normally hidden. Doherty depicts a tension between the desire to descend to aquatic zones, in a manner akin to Alaimo's (2013) 'violent-black ecology', and the desire to bring those zones to the surface. Blue

Planet II brings the depths of the ocean – 'the final frontier on Earth' – to its terrestrial viewers.

v. Blue Planet: Imperial enterprise?

A concern with encounter might focus on the relational event between viewer and screen to consider what is unsettled when ocean life and watery environments are brought into view. It might also focus on particular moments of contact between the members of the Blue Planet team and various non-human animals, which are recalled and retold as moments that somehow left an impression. While challenging the notion that power travels in uni-directional ways these concerns develop one-sided accounts and focus on specific events of relation. The concept of the contact zone, however, draws our attention away from the screen and from individual encounters to attend more fully to the spaces that are depicted – the documentary's sites of production – where multiple beings, objects and elements *grapple* with each other, and where different kinds of on-going relations and meaning-making destabilise any monopoly on interpretation, even while they are shaped by asymmetrical relations of power.

In turning to the contact zone, I want to return to those questions that were raised in Section II around representation, voice, and decipherability: what are the gaps? If the majority of Blue Planet II is a one-sided account of the multi-species contact zone where are the other stories? What room is there for alternative worldviews and what voices are missing, or indeed actively erased? What does this mean for understanding the workings of power? Staying with the wider questions of *Imperial Eyes* demands that attention is given to the mutual emergence of lives and worlds, to hybrid ontologies, and contingent becomings, in a way that challenges the assumption that power travels in uni-directional ways. But it also demands that we remain attentive to the ways in which some lives and knowledges continue to be unequally positioned and represented and to ask what this means for the construction of geographical imaginations and depictions of so-called 'frontier' spaces.

In a reflection on the 'power-laden conditions' of wildlife documentary filmmaking, Collard (2016) underlines the need to consider how non-human lives are both exploited and invaded. The production of Blue Planet II involves multiple forms of interference:

'catching rides' with dolphins (4), affixing cameras to orchas for a 'giants-eye view of the ocean' (1, 49:50), and the use of decoys and biomimicry (2), all of which, as Collard argues, raise questions about disease transmission, the invasion of privacy and the violent consequences of rendering life visually and aurally encounterable. In addition to the invasive practices of filmmaking, it is prudent to consider the ongoing impacts of oceanic representations. Whilst Blue Planet II might have a tangible impact on environmental awareness and consumption practices, it also has the potential to further intensify the colonization and destruction of the sea through the generation of tourism and a desire for further exploration – whether swimming with dolphins, coral snorkeling, whale watching, photography tours or even the purchase of submersibles for personal use, as was reported in the months after Blue Planet II was aired (Cloke and Perkins, 2006; Neate, 2018). Such tourism has significant implications for behavioral ecologies, environmental pollution, and further drives to privatise the sea and the coast (Ingersoll, 2016). At the same time, the environmental messaging of the programme does little to unsettle ideas of human stewardship over nature, which keeps distinctions between nature and society in place and is further exacerbated by mourning the loss of 'pristine nature' (Anderson, 2000; Cohen, 2013; Palmer, 2006). This denies interconnection, hybridity, entanglement and forms of mutuality, even whilst the ocean is presented as a 'metaphor for global unity' that pulls together all forms of life (Ingersoll, 2016:20). In this vein, while the catastrophic effects of capitalism and extraction are recognized, Blue Planet II maintains the very structures that it purportedly seeks to critique.

Asking questions about unequal power relations in the multispecies contact zone is not only about examining the ways in which traditions of thought have privileged the human – and the violence that such a privileging allows – but is also about questioning what forms of knowledge are prioritized, and what *versions* of humanness are evoked (Wynter, 2015). As Ingersoll (2016:6) argues, other forms of politics, ethics and ways of knowing, which reveal different 'oceanic sensibilities', pluralities, and connections to the sea, offer alternative 'seascape epistemologies' that centre intangibility, challenge land-based geographies that Other the ocean, and disrupt the Western drive for 'absolute truths' (see also Todd, 2016). In the short segments '*Into the Blue'*, it is the voices of the Blue Planet II team that are heard. Whilst local guides, surfers, fisherman, and other forms of knowledge occasionally come into view (most notably in the final episode), they are rarely given a voice but are instead narrated. This is particularly notable in the

penultimate episode when a 'full-scale expedition' (6, 48:40) is launched to the Galapagos Islands in the hope of capturing 'an almost unbelievable story' (6, 47:40) that had been brought to the attention of the team by a local cameraman who had heard it from a fisherman. Despite describing the story of sea lions hunting tuna as highly unconvincing – and with the team's 'credibility' apparently 'on the line' – 'the lure of the fisherman's tale was too great to ignore' (6, 48:17). In keeping with the tone of the documentary, the segment finishes with triumphant footage. As we are informed, "Richard has succeeded in filming this unique hunting strategy and in so doing has proved the fisherman's tale to be true" (6, 56:20). The trope of the 'fisherman's tale' gestures to the far-fetched and fanciful, an exaggerated story that lies outside of that which is considered credible knowledge. The team perform the work of translation and transform the fisherman's 'tale' into an authoritative account and another first for the Blue Planet team.

The footage of sea lions hunting tuna has an interactional history that appears only as traces. Just as the discoveries that were documented and claimed by travellers on the frontiers of Europe were often directed, informed and managed by local inhabitants (Pratt 1992:113), Blue Planet II's images are produced through heterogeneous relationships. Yet, it is the team's powers of observation that hold authority. Such a practice of 'witnessing' and the 'privileging of ocular vision' (Cosgrove, 2001) is central to the documentary's claims to knowledge but is also central to scientific understanding. This is clear in the story of a 'lonely' whale shark, which was filmed just off Darwin Island. Having followed the pregnant whale shark after she dives to around 600 metres, gradually losing the light as she leaves the recording equipment behind, we are informed that whilst we are 'one step closer to solving the mystery', the place where the whale sharks give birth has yet to be found. Despite the number of expectant sharks that assemble around the island and the strong evidence that somewhere here 'lies the nursery of the biggest fish in the sea', the area can't be protected until this mystery is *seen* (4, 36:17).

The points that I raise here relate to the translation of knowledge, cultures of scientific practice, epistemic tensions, and the generation of authority, as a means of highlighting the power relations that shape interactions in, and representations of, the multispecies contact zone. Before I focus more fully on the question of non-human life, I want to turn to the role of the planetary as a way of acknowledging some of the overlaps that

exist between the genres of travel writing explored by Pratt (1992), and some of Blue Planet II's geographical imaginations. These imaginations, I suggest, work to further solidify unequal relations of power, whilst obscuring them at the same time.

The crystallisation of a 'planetary consciousness' is central to Blue Planet II's environmental message, which is underlined by frequent images of the globe, its orbit of the sun, and depictions of a journey that takes us "to the ends of the earth". As Jazeel (2011:79) has argued in the context of cosmopolitanism, the 'motif' of the planet – particularly those images of the Earth as photographed from space – becomes central to a form of planetary imagination that is presented as somehow capable of bypassing the scalar restrictions of nation, culture, race, and perhaps even species, whilst also unsettling the privileging of 'terra' (cf. Peters et al. 2018). But such a reference to the planetary does not pose a 'radical rupture' from imperial histories of subordination and hierarchy for it necessarily reclaims a singular perspective and in so doing 'occupies a position of overview or domination' (Jazeel 2011: 81). The image of the planet is steeped in Western imperialism and offers a totalizing view (Cohen, 2013; Cosgrove, 2001; Messiri, 2016).

The depiction of a planetary consciousness through the emergence of a new understanding of humanity's relation to the oceans creates a problematic universality for, despite the global nature of the 'journey', the ideas and beliefs that are projected are forged in one locale, and are deeply rooted in the cultures of British broadcasting and Western traditions of science, discovery, and categorisation, which further mobilise a 'genre' of the human that often reifies the West (cf. Wynter and McKittrick 2015). Whilst other worlds are occasionally admitted, it is through a very particular lens. As such, the global mission is what Cosgrove (2001:265) would describe as 'inescapably imperial' as it fails to admit other voices and other worlds yet simultaneously conceals the privileging of a centre. Indeed, as Cosgrove (p.14 original emphasis) argues, 'the contemporary resonance' of 'those regions long placed on the margins of a Eurocentric *ecumene*', which includes polar ice caps and deep oceans, 'owes much to the history of Western global visualisation and imaginings'. Furthermore, the 'we' of humanity that is addressed by Attenborough – the 'we' that cannot imagine, the 'we' that is responsible for the destruction of the oceans, and the 'we' that is also a part of the solution – fails to acknowledge that some are more implicated in the ocean's destruction than others. As Wynter suggests, the 'referent-we – whose normal behaviors are destroying the

habitability of our planet' and who is frequently summoned in reports on environmental crisis – 'is that of the *human population as a whole'* (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015:24; Kanngieser, 2015). This means that whilst the scientific practices and technological advances of the West allow it to emerge as best suited to advancing environmental justice, its particular role in the destruction of the oceans is not addressed.

To this point, I have drawn out some of the unequal relations of power that shape the contact zone, the wider production of the Blue Planet II series, and its knowledge claims. Focusing on the interactional histories of the documentary is an important part of exposing the heterogeneous relationships that were a part of its creation (even if not always visible), but in the final section I turn more fully to the question of 'voice'.

Vi. Decipherability and the question of voice

In order to challenge one-sided accounts of the contact zone, Pratt attended to other forms of representation and sought out alternative voices so as to disrupt imperial claims to knowledge. In order to challenge the monopoly on knowledge seen in Blue Planet II, we might seek out other human voices and forms of knowledge, to challenge the 'genre' of the human that is mobilized and follow the interactional traces that only partly appear during '*In the Blue'*. But what of the animal? What of the other life forms that grapple and are grappled with in the oceanic contact zones?

Blue Planet II is the product of multiple contact zones, and might, in many ways be considered a one-sided account. But there is no denying that the non-human lives that it features make an impression – on both TV audiences and team members alike. Such impressions complicate any sense that the unequal power relations of the contact zone dictate it (Faier and Rofel, 2014). Whilst the documentary is shaped by unequal forms of power, the Blue Planet II team recount their 'new found respect' (6, 56:00), flashes of wonder, awe, and fear, and moments in which they are somehow shaken, or 'charmed' (5, 52:33). In these accounts of the contact zone the usual order of things has been unsettled and something else – perhaps something akin to recognition – emerges, which stretches the ability for comprehension, particularly when it relates to those creatures that don't have recognizable forms of ecological charisma (Lorimer, 2007). As Alaimo argues, creatures that lie 'beyond our imagination' demand a post-human recognition, which

challenges us to 'imagine more fluid ontologies and more immanent and immediate modes of knowledge' (2013:154).

Attending to the limits of comprehension is an important way of challenging human exceptionalism. As Lorimer suggests, in Attenborough documentaries the continual cuts to eyes 'are disconcerting; we cannot be sure that they express what David Attenborough's commentary wants us to believe. There is a gap, an aporia in the tight interspecies attunement supposedly on display… with this dissonance they begin to evoke dimensions of difference' (2015:129). Whilst this gap or failed comprehension might start to undermine forms of exceptionalism that are rooted in the values attributed to empirical distinctions, these dimensions of difference allude to the process of becoming that is generative of new ways of being. Nevertheless, I think it useful here to highlight that some viewers might be more alive to dissonance than others, whilst some might be far more willing to accept Attenborough's narration. Blue Planet II does insist, however, on foregrounding the unknown – 'who knows what the biggest brain in the ocean dreams about…?' (4, 8:18). Whilst the narratives are human, awkward resonances, gaps and dissonance expose the limits of human understanding in a context where 'human modes of perception are marginalised' (Alaimo, 2013: 236).

Given Pratt's interest in decipherability as a means of attending to alternative experiences of the contact zone, it is worth asking what it means to decipher in the context of the multispecies contact zone. On the one hand, there remains a commitment to keeping hold of that which cannot be deciphered or translated into a more familiar system of meaning. For instance, Todd and Hynes' (2017) argue that any desire to incorporate the force of cross-species encounter into a system of meaning should be actively resisted. To take encounters with animals seriously, they argue, requires an attendance to a 'more sensate and differential ontology' and its non-representational forms (3; Deleuze, 1994). Encounters 'seize thought' and 'unravel the unity of the faculties' and it is only through keeping hold of their 'radically ungrounding effects' that we can begin to challenge species hierarchies and our most familiar way of knowing (2017:x). For Todd and Hynes, encounters are not just an event of difference but an event of 'difference *in thought'* (2017:2; see also Derrida, 2008; Instone and Taylor, 2015). Here we move away from understanding difference as something that is empirically recogniseable to instead consider immanent potential and forms of becoming. The idea that the transformative

potential of encounter might be realized only when the 'trickiness' and ambiguity of human-animal encounters is taken seriously is one that is seen elsewhere (Instone, 2004). For instance, Carter and Palmer (2017) argue that an acceptance of the 'trickiness' of human-dingo encounters is paramount to allowing oneself to be affected and to putting one's knowledge at risk, thus leaving room for more responsive ethical repositionings and a whole new way of thinking about transgression and forms of difference.

Whilst these points respond to the question of decipherability, they still centre human experiences of encounter – with tuning into the way in which the human is unsettled in particular events of relation. This might begin to trouble uni-directional forms of power so as to question how 'species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters' (Haraway 2008:4), but it still maintains a one-sided account. In their focus on 'animals' atmospheres' Lorimer et al. (2017) deal with the challenge of understanding how animals 'tune into the world' (p.1) and 'sense the atmospheric', underlining the epistemic tensions that have long been associated with such attempts to understand. This includes asking how animals experience 'the shock of the new' that might be associated with the encounter; with how they sense and respond to the effects of 'anthropogenic atmospheric disruption' (7), or the shifting intensities of animal *umwelts* (Böhm and Ullrich, 2019). These questions better prioritise a concern for alternative versions of the contact zone, but also return us back to Section II and the recognition that the tools for interpretation and understanding may not always exist and that there are limits to what is amenable to forms of representation.

In light of this gap, I want to finish with the question of communication, and the new forms that might emerge. Scholars interested in the formation of new semiotics or forms of 'trans-species communication' (Faier and Rofel, 2014) have variously considered how creatures communicate through chemical agency (Tsing, 2015), echolocation calls (Mason and Hope, 2014), bioluminescence (Alaimo, 2013), or develop forms of 'trans-species pidgin' (Kohn, 2013). In looking back at Doherty's account of her team's efforts to capture footage of the Humboldt squid, a form of biomimicry comes into view as the team 'mimic' the 'bioluminescent distress signals of deep-sea jellyfish' to attract the squid. This is not a process of deciphering, but a performance of replication, which uses the 'language of light' to communicate *something* (Alaimo, 2013:246). As Alaimo suggests, in attempts to interact with animals in their 'own language', we might observe a 'joyful

abandon' – a human exhilaration of speaking a language that is not fully understood in order to seduce and talk with other creatures on their own terms. But whilst this might 'enact a posthuman practice' (see also Hayward, 2010), with little understanding of what is being communicated it is paramount to ask what vulnerabilities might be effected by such 'conversation' (247). As Pratt (1992) argues, lack of understanding in the contact zone can be a peril and one that is exacerbated by highly uneven relations of power. The question should always be: who is at peril and what are the consequences?

Vii Conclusion

"We honestly do not know what we're going to find down there. We're going to a place that has never been explored. There could be nothing, there could be a carpet of life… there could be anything in-between - who knows?" (2, 51:20)

A heady mixture of science and spectacle, Blue Planet II demands a careful analysis of how its radical possibilities for new ways of thinking exist alongside the foreclosure of alternative imaginations. Blue Planet II is a story of struggle and triumph, state of the art instruments, and the "seeking [of] extraordinary untold stories" (1, 48:41). However, whilst the trope of the planetary, the expedition to the final frontier, and the promise to bring back new knowledge from 'alien worlds' (2, 5:28) and 'uncharted depths' (2, 1:49), point to the repetition of imperial forms, it is important to heed Stoler's warning about the need to 'unsettle well-worn formulations of imperial attributes' and their presumed continuities (2013:6). Such a warning is all the more important in the context of the contact zone. If it is to be used as an analytical tool for understanding relations of domination *or their aftermaths,* challenging the assumption that imperial effects can be easily identified is paramount (Stoler, 2016).

The use of the contact zone as an analytical lens should draw attention to complexity: different configurations and forms of power as they are reworked to different effects. It thus recognises that unequal power 'doesn't always go in expected directions' (Haraway 2008:219). In framing Blue Planet II as a product of multiple oceanic contact zones, which only occasionally come into view, I have demonstrated how a concern for contact zones draws attention to the documentary's site of production, the occlusion of other narratives, and the improvisational, co-constitutional nature of multiple-selves in relation.

Importantly, in using the concept in a multispecies context there are a number of issues at stake. First, is that the focus on species should not displace a concern for other forms of difference and the questions that occupied Pratt in relation to the standpoints and worldviews that are missing from dominant narratives. Second, is the notion of decipherability and how other, non-human experiences are made sense of and whether such a translation is desirable or even possible without reducing difference into more familiar systems of meaning. These questions require a recognition of the epistemological frameworks and practices of knowledge-making that are called up by such endeavors and a reflection on the 'we' that is summoned (Todd, 2016). Third, is the issue of representation and the importance of asking what representations of the contact zone do: what does it mean to bring creatures into view, particularly when they exist 'at the far reaches of our ability to construct sturdy interspecies connections' (Alaimo, 2013)? As Alaimo argues, the construction of visual representations – the very act of making creatures perceptible – can reveal forms of 'care, wonder, and concern', which, in the case of Blue Planet II clearly overlap with wider concerns for the ocean or environmental destruction. Yet, whilst the contact zone evidently enables forms of 'posthuman recognition' that challenge human exceptionalism there is, of course, always the risk that its visual representation does little more than unite its viewers in appreciation (ibid). Worse still, is the risk that its representation can lead to forms of exposure that can have damaging or lethal consequences.

In asking questions about what representations can do politically and ethically, it is important to consider the role of critique. A critical reading of Blue Planet II through the lens of the contact zone is not to deny the important role that the documentary has played in developing environmental concern and response. Indeed, it is precisely because of the documentary's status in environmental discourse that a critical analysis of its geographical imaginations is so important. A focus on Blue Planet II's role in raising environmental consciousness and the potential for posthuman forms of recognition should not obscure the 'tenacious presence' of imperial dispositions (Stoler, 2016:4), the voices that are foreclosed, and the genres of the human that it deploys. Such presences and absences, I suggest, variously limit the possibility for more critical questions concerning the complexities of environmental degradation and how its effects are unequally borne.

Finally, I want to finish by returning to the relationship between encounter and the contact zone as an important intervention into debates that have concerned the socio-cultural complexities of interactions across difference. Whilst the experience of encounter can be one-sided, the contact zone is about lives, cultures, and knowledges that grapple with each other, and is thus always about meaning-making on multiple sides. As a particular 'genre of contact' (Wilson, 2017), the encounter makes up just one element of the contact zone, where the initial shock of difference might give way to something else. Thus, whilst both concepts are intimately linked and draw attention to border imaginaries and immanent potential, the contact zone brings negotiation, interaction, and questions of communicative practice into sharp relief. In multispecies contexts that continue to be shaped by dominant narratives, anxieties around questions of voice and decipherability, and a tendency to erase human differences (Probyn, 2016), the concept of the contact zone is an important analytical tool.

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